

Title: The What, How, and Why of Remembering

Date: 2/4/2024 (Epiphany 5, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 40:21-31](#); [1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#); [Mark 1:29-39](#); [Psalm 147:1-12, 21c](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Epiphany-5-The-What-How-and-Why-of-Remembering-e2fc2gm>

Video Link: [https://youtu.be/3Mp\\_IY9\\_TCA?t=1509](https://youtu.be/3Mp_IY9_TCA?t=1509)

Please be seated.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Here, the prophet Isaiah is asking what we call “rhetorical questions.” He’s pointing out, in a roundabout way, “You have forgotten what you know”; “You have forgotten what you’ve heard.”

It feels like the more methods we have to communicate with people, the harder it is to actually communicate, to get people to remember our message. People need to hear or see something multiple times and in multiple ways before it sinks in.

So, I’m going to pause for a public service announcement and remind everyone that Ash Wednesday is on February 14. We’ll have Ashes to go from 7am-8:30am, service at noon and 7pm. This year we have a special page for Lent on our website. So, go to [stalbansaustin.org/lent](http://stalbansaustin.org/lent) to sign up for Sunday Suppers and for suggestions for Lenten practices.

Now back to the sermon.

One reason that it’s so hard to remember things is that our habitual use of smartphones and social media is rewiring our brains.<sup>1</sup> We store and retrieve information in a different way than we did ten, fifteen years ago. I pick up my phone to do one thing, and I end up doing something else. It’s not until I put down my phone that I remember that I meant to do something else in the first place. So, I pick up my phone, and the cycle repeats.

What we remember can say a lot about who or what is important to us. In movies and TV shows, when a hacker has to guess a password or pin number, they often start with birthdays and anniversaries. The assumption is that these are important dates that people can easily recall, given that they’ve made an effort to memorize them.

Taking this to the next step, the stories we remember shape the way we see our relationships. The connections between people are strengthened by the number and richness and depth of the stories they share. Part of the joy of going on a honeymoon, or a vacation with family or friends, is adding to the wealth of stories we can recall in the future; we come home with more common references we can use as a shorthand, a better understanding of one another after experiencing them

in a different context. All of our relationships, whether positive or painful, are built on stories.

This is one reason Dementia and Alzheimer's and anything that causes people to forget is so devastating. As their memories fade and change, they change and their attitude toward us changes. It feels as if we're losing the person we've known and loved. Occupational therapists tell us to use photos and mementos as prompts to help them remember, to encourage **them** to tell us the stories. As their memory fades, we who are left holding these memories may be filled with love and gratitude AND with immense grief.

Since memory forms the foundation for our relationships, the Bible, our worship, and our traditions are all about helping us remember. In today's Old Testament passage, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the people of Israel as they returned from their exile in Babylon. He hears them lament and complain, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God."

In response, Isaiah tries to help them remember the transcendence of their God "who sits above the circles of the earth." The God of their people stretches out the heavens and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Their God is everlasting and the Creator of the ends of the earth AND still chooses to call the stars by name and feed the ravens. God is incomparable and has no equal AND God chooses to be present **to them**.

God is renewing their strength; God will help them rebuild. All they need to do...is remember.

### **Have you not known? Have you not heard?**

Indeed, all we need to do is remember, and remembering is becoming increasingly complicated.

Leading memory researcher Charan Ranganath points out, "We update our memories through the act of remembering, so it creates all these weird biases and infiltrates our decision making. It affects our sense of who we are."<sup>2</sup>

You might have heard the saying, "History is written by the winners." But more and more it feels like history is written by the people whose narratives shape our collective memory. Whether they "won" or not, as long as they are loud and insistent, some will continue to accept and repeat their version as truth.

Old wars and struggles are alive and present every time history textbooks are published, every time we ask about the people memorialized in statues and stained glass windows, every time we reconsider the names of our schools and streets and the holidays we celebrate.

This is true of Biblical Studies and Church History and Feast Days, too.

There are those who believe that we can be completely objective when we read Scripture and find meaning in them. They believe there is one original and pure version of the Old and New Testament. The saying “to take something as gospel truth” means to accept something without hesitation, but that ignores the fact that there are four version so the gospel.

There are those who believe that the priests and missionaries of the past followed the example of Paul and became as the people they were teaching and preaching to. So, we just need to read and share *their* approach to understanding God, Creation, and the Christian life. There is no need to hear from the people they enslaved and the people they colonized, from the women, from the people they were trying to assimilate and indoctrinate into their way of living and thinking.

These last years, there has been a movement to lift up the stories buried under the weight of history, to highlight the stories pushed to the margins, to give voice to the stories whispered in the empty spaces between the words on the page.

This isn’t just an intellectual exercise. This is about enriching our collective memory of God. This is about remembering **all** the ways that God has been at work in and among us. This is about expanding our understanding of how God loves us and speaks to us.

For example, naming God not just as Father but also Shepherd, lioness, and mother hen<sup>3</sup> doesn’t take anything away from God. It doesn’t hurt or diminish God. It helps **us** recognize and thus remember all the ways God cares for us and acts in the world, even if we haven’t experienced for ourselves.

Likewise, when we expand the books and people we accept as authority, that is not a threat to God, that is not judgment on the way we have practiced our faith; it is part of a discipline that will help us grow into the commission we have been entrusted with.

When we talk about seeing Jesus in people who are poor and unhoused, in people who are sick, we tend to focus on doing something **for** them, but it is also about listening to them so we can hear what God is saying. When Paul talks about winning Jews or those under or outside the law, it doesn’t start with him overpowering them or telling them they’re wrong. It starts with him learning about them; it starts with curiosity.

February is Black History Month. Many dioceses now celebrate the feast day of Absalom Jones, the Episcopal Church’s first African-American priest. As we do, let us also remember that in exchange for ordaining him, his parish had to give up their right to vote at their diocesan convention. Let us remember that historically Black churches, historically “ethnic” churches are often under-resourced because the people who founded those churches didn’t have slave trade money or railroad money or the modern-day equivalent. Let us remember to be intentional about who we read and listen to, who we see as an authority on God and Scripture.

## **Have you not known? Have you not heard?**

Recognizing what and how we remember helps us be self-aware about how we read and share Scripture.

As Ranganath tells us “[O]ur memories function more like active interpreters, working to help us navigate the present and future.”

Two examples. First, according to the prophet Isaiah, “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa 40:29-31).

As someone whose identity is built on memories of the importance of “getting it done,” it’s easy for me to look at these verses and say, “I need to mount up with wings. I need to run, or at the very least, walk.”

But remembering the importance God places on Sabbath, remembering that Jesus went out to a deserted place and prayed when everyone had all these expectations of him, I try to give equal weight, or even more weight, to the phrase “those who wait for the Lord.”

The way to renew our strength isn’t to increase the number of our side hustles. It isn’t to multi-task or multi-focus. It isn’t working harder or sleeping less so we can do it all. The way to renew our strength is to wait for the Lord, to rest in the Lord. That is a good and hard thing to remember, so I keep preaching about it, to you and to me.

Second example, given my experience as a woman, as someone who is expected to help, when I read today’s gospel, I can’t help but resent the fact that once the fever left Simon’s mother-in-law, she began to serve Jesus and his disciples. I want to throw my arms up and ask, “Can’t the poor woman get a break?”

Yes, service is an important part of Christian discipleship. Jesus himself knelt to wash the feet of his disciples, but that was big deal because it wasn’t expected of him, whereas this is expected of her. One commentary tries to get around that by pointing out that the Greek word used here for “serve” shares the same root as the word for “deacons.” So, Simon’s mother-in-law is the first deacon, long before Stephen in the book of Acts. Another commentary tries to get around that by saying this is a reminder that being Christian isn’t something we do at church, it’s part of everyday life.

Yes, I know Mark isn’t necessarily trying to reaffirm gender roles in the gospel. But there is a difference between remembering this story as “Jesus healed her, and so she got up and fulfilled her role as host” and “Jesus healed her, and her response marked her as the first deacon in the New Testament.”

As I close, to refresh our memories:

- What we remember can say a lot about who or what is important to us.

- The stories we remember shape our relationships.

- It's important to examine whose stories and which stories we try to learn and remember.

- It's important to be intentional and self-aware as we read and share the stories of scripture, for the way we remember them has a big impact on our individual and collective relationship with the God and the people of God and the way we practice our faith.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nicholascarr.com/?page\\_id=16](https://www.nicholascarr.com/?page_id=16)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/04/magazine/charan-ranganath-interview.html?smid=nytcore-android-share>

<sup>3</sup> <https://marquandchapel.yale.edu/news/dean-dawn-naming-god-inclusive-and-expansive-language>